

## **Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh**

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### **Asia's largest refugee population, Rohingya**

On August 25, 2017, an armed force calling itself the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked police and military institutions with hatchets and bamboo spears and killed 12 border guards and police officers. The Myanmar national army responded to this attack with a large-scale cleanup operation of Rohingya villages. According to a survey by Doctors Without Borders, within one month, this operation resulted in the deaths of 6,700 Rohingya people. Namavanee Ratna Patten, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, visited the refugee camps in November 2017 and issued a condemnation to the Myanmar government for organized brutal actions, such as the collective rape of women by Myanmar national army soldiers, which qualifies as a “crime against humanity.” Local media reported that, in the latter half of the year, as many as 700,000 Rohingya people have crossed the border. This has led to a situation in which approximately 1.11 million individuals, including those Rohingya people already in Bangladesh, are living in refugee camps.

### **History of Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh**

This is not the first time that the Rohingya people have flown into Bangladesh en masse. In 1978, about 200,000 refugees entered the country fleeing the persecution of the Myanmar military government. Almost all are believed to have repatriated within a year following diplomatic talks between the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Also, in mid-1991, the Rohingya people continued to cross the border to escape from robberies, forced labor, and violence, all of which were carried out by the Myanmar army. During the peak period, over 5,000 people were crossing each day, and about 270,000 in

total were accommodated in the 21 refugee camps set up in Cox's Bazar district in the Southeast as well as in the hilly district of Bandarban. The Bangladeshi government initially expressed support for fellow Muslims and received refugees, but there were so many people requiring assistance that the government sought early repatriation through bilateral negotiation. Around that time, there were 60,000 refugees from Bangladesh's Chakma tribe (an indigenous ethnic minority who are frequently victims of murders and violence by Bengali settlers and the army) in Tripura State in Eastern India. Therefore, in terms of diplomatic relations with India, Bangladesh's suspension of that issue and subsequent acceptance of Rohingya refugees was unfavorable. As a result, Bangladesh and Myanmar released a joint statement regarding the refugees' repatriation on April 28, 1992, and the situation was brought to an end with the involvement of the United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees. However, a large number of Rohingya people did not repatriate and still remain in Bangladesh.

At the end of May 2012, in Rakhain state, a Buddhist Rakhain girl was assaulted and killed by a group likely comprised of Muslim Rohingya. This incident triggered an intensification of the retaliation conflicts between both ethnic groups and on June 10, a state of emergency was declared. During this process, hundreds of Rohingya people also sought asylum in Bangladesh.

As such, the Rohingya people who were denied the ability to return to Myanmar and stayed in Bangladesh either lived in one of two official refugee camps remaining in the country or lived among the general public of Bangladesh. According to the UNHCR, in 2016, more than 300,000 Rohingya people lived in Bangladesh. However, since the British colonial period, these people have freely entered and exited the country by crossing the bordering Naf River located between the two countries. They speak the Bengali language with a Chittagong accent from Southeast Bangladesh. It is not easy to distinguish between the Bangladeshi and Rohingya people, as many have Rohingya ancestors or relatives in the border area. Therefore, it is difficult to grasp the exact number of Rohingya, and it has been said that the actual amount could outnumber the estimate made by the UNHCR.

As a further complication in this situation this situation, on October 9, 2016, an armed group, which later declared themselves as Harakah al-Yaqin, attacked three police

facilities and killed nine police officers in Rakhain state. The Myanmar national army regarded this incident as an attack by the Rohingya people and took military action in the form of a crackdown, which led to the exodus of nearly 70,000 Rohingya people, who crossed the border to Bangladesh within two months. Prime Minister Hasina of Bangladesh held talks with the Vice Foreign Minister of Myanmar on January 12 of the following year in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, to negotiate for repatriation, and included the request to “bring back” Rohingya evacuees to the Myanmar side. Meanwhile, the Myanmar government began exhaustively exposing Rohingya armed forces within the country. On February 15, the State Counselor Office announced the completion of the National Army’s cleanup operation of armed forces and the restoration of order.

The above-mentioned attack by ARSA then happened, directly resulting in as many as 700,000 refugees. The Myanmar government undertook a cleanup operation since they perceived ARSA as the same organization as Harakah al-Yaqin. The operation was mainly conducted by the Myanmar national army but apparently the police, border guards, and general public of villages also partially participated. In this operation, which evicted a large number of Rohingya to Bangladesh, the army set fire to villages with the aim of erasing all places for ARSA members to hide. The series of actions exceeded the initial scope of the operation, which was to “clean up terrorism,” as it included firing shots from the bank at those crossing the river to flee, and laying landmines to prevent their return. The UN and international NGOs criticized the activities, which included tortures, prosecutions, and rapes, and were openly taking place in the name of the search for ARSA.

### **Between Myanmar and Bangladesh**

Rohingya is the name that Bengali Muslims living in the Rakhain state of Myanmar use for themselves. The Myanmar government, however, does not recognize the existence of the ethnic group of Rohingya in the country at all, claiming that they are Bengali illegal immigrants. According to the Nationality Act of Myanmar, which came into effect in 1982, those who are not members of ethnic groups whose residence was recognized prior to 1823 would be individually examined and classified into the categories of “associate

citizens”, “naturalized citizens” or “foreigners.” The Rohingya are called “Bengali” and are legally treated as “foreigners.”

Despite the fact that a number of Rohingya have lived in Myanmar for generations, many Myanmar people take the government’s official position as self-evident. In addition to the government’s historical understanding of the Rohingya as a non-indigenous ethnic group, their status as minority Muslims in Myanmar is leading to conscious discrimination with the aim of elimination. Theravada Buddhists, who comprise nearly 90% of total citizens, do not strongly feel conscious discrimination towards Christians or Hindus but have strong feelings of hatred towards Muslims. Therefore, ungrounded stories and rumors, such as the notion that Muslims who bear many children will take over Buddhist Myanmar one day, or the belief that Muslims deceive Buddhist women to get married and convert them to Islam, have spread among the public.

Furthermore, unlike so-called “Myanmar people,” the Rohingya people have Bengali features, such as darker skin and craggy facial features. Many speak their own unique language, which is one dialect of Bangladesh’s national language, Bengali, and do not speak Myanmar’s official language of Burmese very well. These characteristics encourage discrimination towards the Rohingya. In this way, it can be said that from the viewpoints of history, ethnicity, religion, language, and race, the Rohingya have been the subject of persecution in Myanmar.

Meanwhile, the Bangladeshi government does not recognize the Rohingya as their citizens either. As stated above, a mass of Rohingya refugees flowed into the country in the late 1970s and early 1990s, but the Bangladeshi government feared that they would continue coming and stopped granting them refugee status in 1992. Since Bangladesh has not ratified the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, the decision whether to grant the people asylum as refugees depends on the government’s judgment at a given point in time. When Buddhists and Muslims clashed in Rakhain state in 2012, the government not only refused to accept the Rohingya but was not even willing to provide different types of humanitarian assistance. In terms of national sentiment, they sympathize with the Rohingya, who are also Bengali-speaking Muslims; however, in reality, it is difficult for Bangladesh to accept many of them, given the severe financial difficulties of that nation.

## **Repatriation agreement discord**

In terms of the repatriation of refugees, the number of which increases by the hundreds each day, the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh held meetings in Naypyidoaw, Myanmar, beginning on November 15, 2017, and signed an agreement on the 23rd. However, they neither agreed on the concrete process of repatriation and due date of completion, nor disclosed the agreement. According to local press reports, this agreement is based on the treaty concluded for the repatriation program in 1992, in which Bangladesh requested the completion of repatriation within one year, accompanied by the UN organizations' involvement in the repatriation process. The Myanmar side requested that repatriation start within two months of the signing but made objections to Bangladesh's requests. Based on the agreement, both countries began compiling a list of Rohingya people who had crossed the border. Because work on the Bangladeshi side has not yet been completed, the repatriation of refugees did not start on January 23, 2018, as planned.

## **Situation in the refugee camps in Coxbazar**

The author visited some Rohingya refugee camps in February 2018. Driving south from the touristic center of Cox's Bazar, a banner stating "Mother of Humanity" is stretched across the road every few kilometers, fully emphasizing the achievements of the assistance provided to the Rohingya by the current government. After about two hours of driving, one arrives at Kutupalong Refugee Camp. In this camp, which has been developed into a hill, about 100,000 Rohingya people live in what one staff member of an assisting organization describes as a "mega camp." From the flat, level land to the hill, the area is so crammed with houses made of bamboo and vinyl, as well as tents showing the logos of assisting organizations, that it is not possible to view the vast campsite all at once. There is a large market where dried fish, vegetables, chewing tobacco, and other daily goods are sold. Wells, simple plastic-made water facilities, toilets, and free clinics, all built by assisting organizations, demonstrate that many organizations provide assistance there.

However, in addition to the density of its living accommodations, unhygienic toilets, as well as running sewage without any drainage systems, reveal the camp's extremely poor sanitary environment. In Bangladesh, it starts raining in April and the full-scale rainy season begins in June. For the toilets without roofs, filthy water overflows very quickly, which could be expected to cause infectious diseases. It is easy for those with low resistance to illness, such as pregnant women, children, and the elderly, to catch these diseases; therefore, it is not only necessary to improve the sanitary environment, but also to spread awareness of basic sanitation practices.

One worrisome phenomenon during the rainy season is landslides. Many people live on the very soft ground of a hillside and it is clear that only a few days of heavy rain could cause landslides immediately. May is the season of cyclones, and disaster management authorities should therefore not delay in assisting those living in the camps with finding other accommodations. According to a survey conducted by the government and the UNHCR announced in March, 100,000 Rohingya people must move for their safety.

Forced prostitution is sadly becoming a norm in the camps. Women and girls are being bought, sold, exported, and often lured to brothels under the pretext of marriage or with the promise of employment. In South Asia, a huge trafficking network of women and girls exists, and one risk of the camps on the Bangladesh-Myanmar border becoming permanent will be that traffickers could systematically begin targeting Rohingya refugees, using the camps as potential hubs for trafficking. At the end of last year, nearly 40 people were identified as active participants in trafficking women and children in the Rohingya refugee camps. These people were endeavoring to traffic Rohingya women and children from Cox's Bazar to locations as far away as the Middle East and Malaysia.

### **The role of Japan and the international community**

In terms of Japan, it has been highly praised by the international community that Foreign Minister Taro Kono visited the refugee camps at an early stage in November 2017 and promised assistance. Conversely, Japan abstained from the resolutions condemning the Myanmar government at the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly on November 16, 2017, and the UN Human Rights Committee on December 5

in the same year, which provoked some discontented voices from within the Bangladeshi government. The Japanese government hopes to restrain Myanmar and China from becoming closer to each other, while Western countries have strongly condemned the Myanmar government. Also, Japanese officials likely aim to resolve the issue through dialogues with both the Bangladeshi and Myanmar governments. Moving forward, the key will be determining the best means by which this goal may be realized.

In the camps, as stated earlier, crises caused by sedimentary disasters during the rainy season and the spread of infectious diseases are expected to increase. International cooperation is urgent and essential to protect the lives of the 1.11 million people living there. It is also necessary for a third-party perspective to examine the progress of the repatriation program based on the bilateral agreement to determine whether it is being implemented, is securing the safety of Rohingya people in Myanmar, and is carried out with their consent. We have arrived at the point in which the issue of Rohingya refugees should not only be addressed bilaterally by Bangladesh and Myanmar, but also as a refugee issue in Asia as a whole. The international community must continue providing support through effective government, Official Development Assistance, and NGOs to ensure that the future of the Rohingya people is not affected by the internal politics of Bangladesh.

**【Note】**

This article is based on a study first reported in the Asia Peacebuilding Initiatives.